

# Hepatitis A Summary and Frequently Asked Questions

*Updated 7/25/2017; Original Version 5/25/2017*

## Summary of San Diego Hepatitis A Outbreak, 2017

Since early 2017, the Public Health Services Division, in the County of San Diego Health and Human Services Agency, has been investigating a local Hepatitis A outbreak. The outbreak investigation is currently ongoing. Control of the outbreak has been challenging because of the long time that it takes for the disease to develop (15 to 50 days) after a person is exposed to the infection (i.e., incubation period) and the difficulty of contacting many individuals sickened with the illness who are homeless and/or illicit drug users. To date, no common source of food, beverage, or other cause has been identified; as a result, the source of the outbreak remains undetermined.

Vaccination efforts are being implemented in targeted locations by County staff and in collaboration with health care partners. For weekly updates on total cases, deaths, hospitalizations, additional educational resources, and the latest public communications (e.g., press releases and health alerts), please go to the County Hepatitis A [webpage](#) or <https://tinyurl.com/n8z6mf3>.

## What is Hepatitis A?

**Hepatitis A** is a highly contagious liver infection caused by the Hepatitis A virus (HAV). It can cause liver disease, which may last a few weeks and sometimes progress to a serious illness lasting months. In some cases, people can die, but in most cases the infection is self-limiting.

## How Is It Spread?

The Hepatitis A virus is spread primarily by the fecal-oral route. This is when an uninfected person ingests food or water that has been contaminated with even a tiny or microscopic amount of the feces from an infected person. This can occur when:

- Touching objects or eating food that someone with HAV infection handled, or
- Having sex with someone who has a HAV infection (not limited to anal-oral contact).

## What Are the Symptoms?

HAV does not always cause symptoms. Adults are more likely to have symptoms than children and can develop symptoms 15 to 50 days after being infected.

Symptoms include fever, fatigue, nausea, loss of appetite, yellowing of the eyes (jaundice), stomach pain, vomiting, dark urine, pale stools, and diarrhea. HAV can cause liver failure and even death – this is rare and is more likely to occur in persons 50 or older and individuals with other forms of liver disease (Hepatitis B or C).

HAV can be spread up to two weeks before and one week after noticing symptoms. It can also be spread by individuals who are infected, but do not have symptoms.

## **How Can HAV Be Prevented?**

- **The best way to prevent Hepatitis A is with the safe and effective Hepatitis A vaccine.** Get two shots of the HAV vaccine, six months apart.
  - Also, the vaccine may be given as a twin vaccine against both Hepatitis A and B, which is given as three shots over six months.
- Don't have sex with someone who has HAV infection.
- Use your own towels, toothbrushes, and eating utensils.
- Don't share food, drinks, or smokes with other people.
- Wash hands after using the bathroom, changing diapers, and before preparing food.

## **Where Can I Get Vaccinated?**

- Call your medical provider or 2-1-1 to find a community clinic or public health center near you to request the HAV vaccine.

## **Is the Hepatitis A Vaccine Safe and Effective?**

- Yes, the vaccine is safe and highly effective in preventing Hepatitis A virus infection. You will be protected approximately 2 to 4 weeks after the first injection and longer-term defense is gained with the second injection. If you do not remember whether you were vaccinated, repeating the vaccination series is not harmful.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), before the Hepatitis A vaccine became available in 1995, more than 25,000 people developed Hepatitis A each year in the U.S. In 2014, there were about 2,500 cases reported.

## **Who Is At Increased Risk for Getting HAV Infection?**

- Travelers to countries with high or medium rates of HAV.
- Men who have sex with men.
- Users of injection and non-injection illegal drugs.
- Persons with clotting factor disorders.
- During this outbreak, individuals with ongoing, close contact with homeless and illicit drug using individuals in San Diego County may also be at increased risk.

## **I routinely work with homeless and/or illicit drug using individuals and am NOT a health care worker. What precautions should I take?**

- Most employees have a low risk of contracting Hepatitis A, if they comply with hand-washing and other hygiene requirements associated with their jobs.
- The best way to protect yourself is to continue to always use standard precautions AND get vaccinated.
- Under usual (non-outbreak) circumstances, occupational exposure does not warrant a routine recommendation to provide HAV vaccination. However, given the current outbreak, the County Public Health Officer recommends HAV vaccination for individuals with ongoing, close contact with homeless and illicit drug using individuals in San Diego County. This includes persons working in public safety,

homeless shelters, and homeless and behavioral service provider agencies (not including health care personnel).

**I routinely work with homeless and/or illicit drug using individuals and am a health care worker. What precautions should I take?**

- Staff in healthcare environments would be expected to be protected by utilizing standard precautions; however staff should also consider HAV vaccination for long-term protection.
- CDC recommends that everyone 12 months of age and older should be vaccinated for Hepatitis A.
- Please discuss with your primary care provider and/or occupational health if you are unsure.

**What can local businesses do to prevent the further spread of Hepatitis A?**

- Remind employees of the importance of hand-washing with soap and warm water after using the bathroom, and before preparing, serving, or eating food.
- Maintain routine and consistent cleaning of bathrooms for employees and the public, using a chlorine-based disinfectant (bleach) with a ratio of 1 and 2/3 cup of bleach to one gallon of water. Due to the high bleach concentration of this mix, rinse surfaces with water after 1 minute of contact time and wear gloves while cleaning.
- For employees in physical contact with others, especially those at risk for Hepatitis A, wear disposable gloves and wash hands after each encounter.
- Coordinate with your occupational health provider to determine if Hepatitis A vaccine should be offered to employees.

**Our Organization Would Like a Presentation About Hepatitis A. Who Should We Contact?**

- To request a County staff to come to your organization to give a Hepatitis A presentation, please contact the Epidemiology Program at 619-692-8499.

**What If I Need Additional Assistance?**

If additional assistance is needed, please contact your healthcare provider, occupational health provider, or call the following:

- California AIDS, STD and Hepatitis Hotline—800-367-AIDS (2437) (24 hours/day, 7 days/week)
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Information Hotline—800-CDC-INFO (232-4636) (24 hours/day, 7 days/week)